



REMBRANDT, THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE REDEEMING WHALE

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Abstract: Analysis of the metamorphoses and subtexts designed by Rembrandt in *The Philosopher in Meditation* (Louvre).

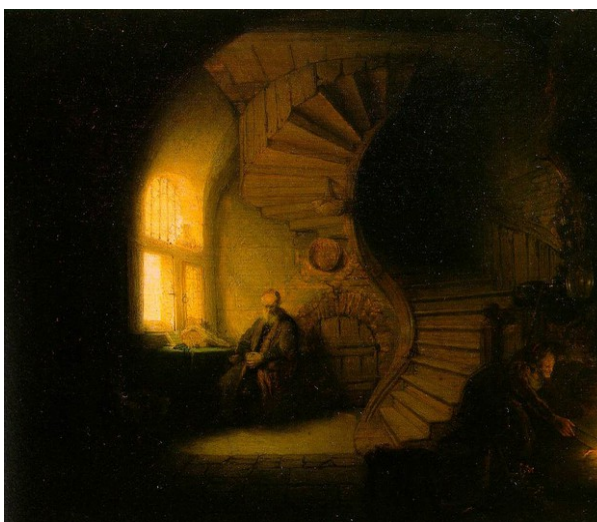
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Rembrandt was one of the great masters in creating ambiguities and optical illusions in order to add layers of meaning to his paintings¹.

This is the case with the painting currently on display under the title *The Philosopher in Meditation* (Louvre)². Here, the entire luminous area of the painting forms the gigantic head of the serpent of temptation, which “swallowed” Adam and Eve. Note that the spiral staircase, which encapsulates the reptile's dark eye, also synthesizes its serpentine and scaly body.

Inside, the aging couple awaits the death to which they have been condemned, representing all of Humanity as their descendants.



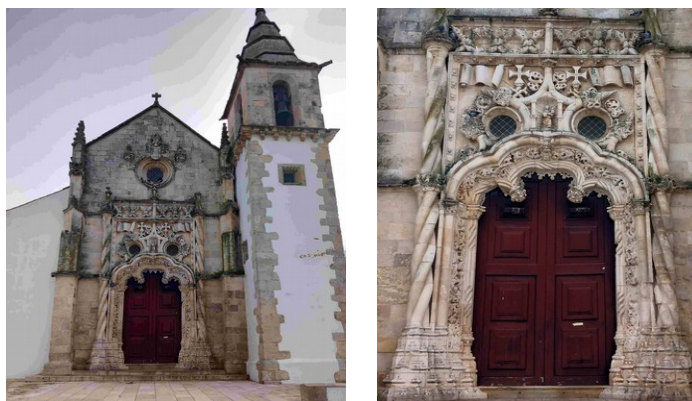
Rembrandt, *The Philosopher in Meditation*,
Louvre [wikimedia.org].

- 1 Regarding the techniques developed by this painter, see the studies *Rembrandt and the art of compromise*, 2012 [academia.edu]; *The Dutch Company*, 2013 [academia.edu]; e *Rembrandt and the Commissioners*, 2014 [academia.edu], all collected in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-1016* [archive.org], respectively pp.49-55, 105-115 e 121-123.
- 2 A partial analysis has already been presented in “O Batel Divinal do Mosteiro dos Jerónimos” in *Octógono* n.16 / Jun. 2025, p.13 [academia.edu | archive.org]; and *Bosch and the hidden devils in the Garden*, 2013, p.6 [academia.edu].

Eve is found on the left or sinister side of the composition itself, tending the fire and preparing the meal for the body, symbolizing Active Life. Adam, in turn, is on the right side and in a superior position. Meditating, he represents here the Contemplative Life ($\approx$ nourishment for the spirit)³. For this reason, like an anguished prophet of the Old Testament, he hopes to find in the rising of the sun a hopeful sign of the future Nativity of the redeeming Messiah.

In this process, the negative serpent becomes the positive one (Aesculapius' rod; caduceus; Moses' serpent, Num.21:7-9; Jn.3:13-14). But above all, Rembrandt here metamorphosed the reptile itself into the whale that returned the swallowed Jonah after three days – something that the Gospels will recognize as a prefiguration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Mt.12:39-41, 16:4; Lk.11:29-32)⁴.

The great whale thus symbolizes Church itself, an idea that is not entirely new, since, for example, in the previous century a temple allegorized both the fall of Man and the redeeming whale.



Diogo de Boytac and Gil Vicente, Church of Our Lady of the Conception, Golegã, early 16th century. General view of the façade and its anthropomorphic and zoomorphic portal.

In this case, ordinary sinners attend regular masses in the eucharistic "belly of the whale" (i.e. the nave), from which they emerge regenerated ($\approx$ resurrected) for everyday life⁵. Such a scenic and theological ritual highlighted the complementary connection between the two Testaments, expressing the evolutionary logic of the Judeo-Christian religion⁶.

In conclusion, the art of those centuries was anything but static, monotonous or predictable, and painters like Rembrandt are good examples of the ability to reinvent and design unexpected dynamics that bring life into compositions.

3 This was the logic, for example, of monastic refectories, where meals were accompanied by the reading of Scripture, and where tables were also placed under the aegis of inspiring paintings (such as Leonardo's *Last Supper*, which was food for the spirit).

4 Regarding this matter, it should be noted that Michelangelo had already associated the positive serpent with the Christological Jonah – see *The Sistine Chapel and the new Jeremiah*, 2013, p.5 [academia.edu], collected in *italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.111-122 [archive.org].

5 On the elaborate symbolic mechanism of this building, see "O horrendo portal manuelino da Golegã" in *Octógono* n.23 / Jan. 2026 [academia.edu | archive.org].

6 Regarding this logic, see "The Vendramin Family by the skillful Titian (Tiziano)" in *Octógono* extra number (20) / Nov.3, 2025 [academia.edu | archive.org].